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American Doctor: Moscow Imposes Psychic Stresses

By Peter Osnos
Washington Post Foreign Service

COW, Jan. 22—Considering
nericans in Moscow have dis-
l in the past year that they are
aturated with Soviet micro-
drinking water contaminated
ngerous parasites and suffer-
arge numbers from a mysteri-
od abnormality, it is under-
le that the embassy's doctor
have become a major figure in
munity.

ie pronouncements of U.S. Air
t. Col. Thomas A. Johnson, a
36-year-old physician with a
und in obstetrics, are re-
with something akin to rever-
has attained a stature herea-
hat international specialists
lifetime trying to achieve—a
to his calm assurances and
reliability as well as to the
t dismayed Americans feel
e no place else to turn.

for U.S. officials and their
however, is only a part of
s responsibility. There are, at
representatives of 90 embas-
ie active patient list, plus res-
sinessmen, students, corre-
s, even tourists. Some 20 am-
s regularly consult him and a
plomat at one major Western
embassy relied heavily on
ntly during a period of ex-
ychological distress.

y ways his practice resem-
of an old-fashioned country
xcept that life in Moscow
a host of special problems in
ess and care that Johnson
redecessors (all, technically,
ir attaches at the embassy)
to deal with.

s enormous "psychic stress"
ed here, Johnson said in an
the other day, husbands
much too hard to meet the
of what many regard as "the
lenging assignment" of their
milies who suffer from the
nforced separation, a gen-
of restrictions and constant
e, a feeling in some asses
sion, of being threatened."

The result, said Johnson, is a high proportion of patients with complaints that reflect those stresses: colitis, inflammation of the large intestine, ulcer diseases, problems with sleep, tremendous anxieties, lack of sexual gratification. There have been four to five nervous breakdowns among just one Western nationality (not Americans) recently, he said, and one official American visitor had to be flown out in a strait-jacket.

"I had to accompany him," Johnson remarked. "He needed medication all the way back. He thought he was going to be done in, if not by the Soviets then by me. We flew on Pan American sitting in the back of a full plane. It was an untenable situation, but there was nothing else I could do."

Because foreigners are generally very reluctant to submit to Soviet medical care unless they must—which Johnson attributes to wariness over what would be unfamiliar surroundings, language problems, a chronic Soviet shortage of medications and often-retold unpleasant experiences—a doctor's concerns here must be logistical as well as medical.

"I have to think about various airline schedules, long flights under pressurized conditions, arrangements on the other end and making sure that you are not placing the patient in significant jeopardy."

In two cases last winter of perforated appendixes involving high-level Americans, Johnson was in a race with time to get them to hospitals in Helsinki. In the 21 months since he arrived in Moscow, hundreds of Johnson's patients have been flown out for treatment.

The alarming disclosure a year ago that high levels of radiation had been detected in the embassy and attributed to Soviet microwave beams exacerbated all the existing difficulties.

"There was a tremendous surge of complaints," said Johnson. "The microwave crisis was a magnificent place for people to express all their pent-up frustration and anxiety.

"From January to June I spent a great deal of time counseling, trying to give reasonable perspective on the situation, trying to impart a feeling that [illegible]

Yet, despite assurances from Washington that the installation of shields on the embassy building and pressures on the Soviets had substantially reduced the radiation level, plus the fact that new arrivals had been briefed in Washington and knew what to expect, some uneasiness remains. The effects of sustained exposure to microwave beams are still under study—indeed, American diplomats past and present are providing scientists with an ideal sample.

Analysis of blood tests made in the microwave study provided another jolt when it was revealed that a third of these examined had abnormally high white-bloodcell counts, an apparently benign but nonetheless puzzling phenomenon.

No connection has been drawn between that condition and the radiation, but all three children whose blood was sufficiently abnormal to warrant further tests in the United States lived within the embassy building itself, where the microwave beams were detected.

Nonetheless, Johnson feels that Americans have mostly come to terms with the additional hazards of working here. "I haven't seen lately the exaggerated reactions that were commonplace after the initial disclosure," he said.

The presence of giardiasis, a parasite in the water that can make children, in particular very sick, is now dealt with calmly, and even the report earlier this month—erroneous, it turned out—that potentially harmful quantities of cyanide and mercury had been found in the water of some buildings where foreigners live barely caused a stir.

But all the fuss over health has put a considerable extra burden on Johnson, despite the undoubted satisfaction of knowing his efforts are greatly appreciated. After months of being on call around the clock, handling perhaps 10 telephone consultations a night and about three night-time house calls a week, "I found I was living in a chronic-fatigue state. I had to